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14 The Gift that Time Gave

Myth and History in the Western Desert Painting Movement

Ian McLean

This was the gift that time gave, and I know this, in my heart, for I was there. (Geoffrey Bardon)¹

The most fabulous moment in Australian art history occurred in the autumn of 1971 when an art teacher named Geoffrey Bardon supplied about a dozen Western Desert men with brushes and acrylic paint. A small and innocent gesture, it sparked a bushfire so intense that the cultural landscape was radically upturned, locally at first and then at a more universal level.

At the time these dozen men were oxygen to the new ideology of self-determination then at war with the old politics of assimilation. In these early years their action seemed more about politics and power than art. It took nearly two decades for their art to ignite a revolution in the art world and become the global brand of 'Australia'. However, from the very beginning Bardon sensed that something profound, something more universal, was happening as these men transformed tribal iconography into modern art. History teaches us that tribal art is destroyed by modernity and appropriated by modernists but does not itself become modern art, least of all on its own terms. Not anymore. These dozen men had made modernism differently. The terms of engagement had shifted. As Bardon remarked, 'nothing would ever be the same again'.²

The shock of the new is an old modernist cliché, but nothing like this had ever been seen before. It defies the historical understanding of both modernism and tribal art – to the extent that history is ill-prepared to explain it. If there was one precedent, it was the art of Albert Namatjira, who achieved international success with his Post-Impressionist water-colour landscapes in the 1950s (see chapter 10). However, his art was misunderstood. By aligning it with conservative rather than modernist forces, the art world was even less prepared for the Western Desert acrylic paintings. No wonder Bardon resorted to the language of myth, describing them 'as a kind of incandescence', 'a marvellous dream of the time' or simply 'the glory'.³

Nor has the art's mythic proportions, under the banner of the fabulous name of Papunya Tula, diminished over the years. The magic only deepened with the fairytale-like successes of other Western Desert painters, such as Rover Thomas from Turkey Creek and Emily Kam Kngwarray from Utopia. The more the story grows and is retold, the more enigmatic it is, and the more it insinuates itself in the Australian psyche. Here it is becoming a founding myth of our times, one to rival the Anzac beachhead.

The myth of Papunya Tula took hold of the art world during the 1980s. The cultural climate of the time was hungry for it; and there it was, like a readymade, in Geoffrey Bardon's eyewitness accounts. These accounts are the primary historical authority and justification of the desert art movement and have shaped every history of it – so much so that the myth has become an essential component of its history.

Bardon depicts the genesis of the movement as a lightning bolt from heaven, as sudden, singular and definitive as it was unlikely. He is the movement's Baptist and witness to an event that is much greater than him. The myth got its first run in Bardon's 1979 book, written in the spare, matter-of-fact manner of a tale strange but true.⁴ Though no less fabulous, his second, more embellished, book, published 12 years later, is a vindication of what happened.⁵ His final lavish and most complete explanation, published in 2004, is a hagiography of the movement's beginnings and the men who made it happen.⁶ One reviewer aptly described it as 'a foundation story of Aboriginal desert art... its bible'.⁷ Like the early boards by Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, such as *Water Dreaming* (1972) (Figure 14.1), which Bardon so admired, its story has a Baroque space: multi-layered, resonant and poetically conceived – everything a myth should be.

For Bardon, the decisive moment in his calling came at the end of 1970, when he was a 30-year-old art teacher in the Northern Territory. Wanting to work with 'tribal Aborigines', he transferred from the Commonwealth Department of Education and Science to the Department of the Interior – specifically, to its office of the Northern Territory Welfare Branch.⁸ At the beginning of 1971 he was posted to a little-known welfare settlement called Papunya. Only a decade old, it had been established to assimilate bush Aborigines into modern life. By the time Bardon arrived some 1400 Aborigines were living in camps on the perimeter of Papunya, sheltering in their low humpies with the dust and insects. About 75 'government men' – as the Aborigines called them – ran the place. Their houses and administrative quarters were the town's only infrastructure.

Bardon remembers slowly driving into the 'deserted streets' of the 'desert village' late on a dark, hot and humid night. The next day rain

began to fall. 'There was a shimmering of wild, darkening purple-and-green forms... and a dancing, glistening feeling came from the stone walls of the mountains.'⁹ The poetry of the place had already begun to take hold of him. It gave him a lightness and energy that distinguished him from the other government men, all weighed down with the 'white-man's burden' of colonial history.

From this point he saw and experienced everything with a heightened emotion. To him Papunya was an unreal de Chirico-like town of 'symmetrical streets without names', 'a desperate place of emotional loss and waste, with an air of casual and dreadful cruelty'. It reminded him of a 'penal settlement', 'filled with twilight people', its dispirited Aborigines 'exiled and lost', 'captives of white man's ridicule'.¹⁰

The Aborigines particularly resented the government men – the welfare bureaucrats – of whom Bardon was one. He immediately cut through this by his deep interest in their culture and the force of his gregarious personality. His amicable relations with the children went well beyond the classroom. It gave him entry to the adults. They found the open, engaged way he related to them, man to man, appealing. 'What occurs to me now', recollected Bardon, 'is that I first treated the Aboriginal men at Papunya as individuals'.¹¹ He came to know these men as family. Unlike other government men who played by the rules, he ate with the Aborigines at their canteen, invited them to his flat and went painting and hunting with them.

Bardon's painting companions were two 'detribalised' Arrarnta painters who worked in the Namatjira landscape style: Keith Namatjira – Albert's son – and Joshua Ebatarinja. However, Bardon's passion was for the 'tribesmen', such as his regular hunting companions Johnny Warangkula and Mick Namerari Tjapaltjarri. Together with their best mate, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, who went on to paint *Corroboree of the Wal-laby Men* (1973) (Figure 14.2), they comprised the Holy Trinity of the early painting movement. Each in his late 40s, between them the three friends represented the main language groups at Papunya: the Pintupi, Luritja and Anmatyerre/Arrarnta.

Making art – in both traditional and Western styles, and hybrids of the two – for the tourist and art market, was a well-established Aboriginal practice in Central Australia by the time Bardon arrived in early 1971.¹² According to him, at this time the 'gifted' Tjampitjinpa, along with Don Ellis Tjapanangka, were the only men at Papunya regularly painting traditional designs.¹³ They had their own studio, the abandoned Old Settlement office – the foundation building of Papunya. Here could also be found the pensioners, the Old Men (ceremonial leaders), who 'centred their enthusiasm around the energy shown by Kaapa'¹⁴ – Mick Tjakamarra, Walter Tjampitjinpa, Tom Onion Tjapangati, Bert Tjakamarra,

Tutuma Tjapangati. Once Bardon began slipping art materials their way he acquired powerful patrons. Later, Bardon learnt, these patriarchs gave permission for the school murals and ultimately the art movement.

The Old Men took to sunning themselves outside Bardon's classroom as if his personal guardians. Inside, Bardon sought to elicit the patterns of 'Indigenous design' from the children. Ignoring the syllabus, he was intent on investigating 'authentic Aboriginal painting styles'. In contrast to the government's mantra, Bardon's was 'nothing whitefella'.¹⁵ The Old Men, along with the school yardmen, Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri – who was also a proficient wood carver – and Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, began taking an interest in his teaching. Bardon asked them for advice and help in developing his lessons, and later learnt that they had decided to allow 'the children to make their drawing designs available to me'.¹⁶

These pedagogical beginnings provided the model of the new art movement.¹⁷ While Bardon was teaching the men began to steal into the back section of his classroom to paint. 'This is where the painting movement began', said Bardon. He remembered 'the steady, full steps of the painters coming up the stairs and then a great silence as they sat down to work'. It seemed, he thought, 'to release them back into their own culture'.¹⁸

At this early stage the core group comprised about a dozen men. Half painted at the school and the other half in the Old Settlement office. They included Tjampitjinpa, Old Don Ellis, Old Mick and Billy Stockman, who were Anmatyerre/Arrarnta speakers; Johnny Warangkula and Long Jack, who identified as Luritja speakers; and the Pintupi-speaking men: Old Walter, Old Tutuma, Mick Namerari, Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi, John Scobie Tjapanangka, Yala Yala Gibbs and Nosepeg Tjupurrula.

Bardon was greatly fascinated by the Pintupi-speaking men: 'their painting had the immediacy of a culture that still depended on bush life'.¹⁹ The most numerous, they were also the most eager to paint. Soon another dozen Pintupi were coming to Bardon's flat asking for art materials. These irregulars would become regulars later in the year. As the number of painters grew, it seemed to Bardon 'that all the men could paint, and it was in fact their primary language of expression'.²⁰

The galvanising moment was the painting of the school murals between June and August, particularly the *Honey Ant* mural. Bardon wrote afterwards:

This was the beginning of the Western Desert painting movement when, led by Kaapa, the Aboriginal men saw themselves in their own image and before their very own eyes, and upon a European building. Truly something strange and marvellous had begun... there were enormous roars, and wild acclamation and dancing and singing, in the great camps at night, and a sense of our best affirmations coming to life.²¹

In August Kaapa won an art prize in Alice Springs, which further stimulated production. Up to this point Bardon had been the main buyer – for himself and for a planned school collection. But, unable to keep up with the production, he took the paintings into Alice Springs to sell on the weekend, raising \$1400. Such an enormous amount of money made the men jubilant, and more came forward to paint. This success then led to the founding, in October, of the Papunya School Painters Co-operative.

At the end of the year Bardon arranged a secure, private and good-sized studio at one end of a large shed – the town hall, next to the Lutheran Mission church – which they occupied in early 1972. The new studio, which Bardon called 'the Great Painting Room', was like a private men's club or ceremonial ground. It provided 'a sense of belonging, and a certain rightness of place',²² which attracted more men, such as the Tjapaltjarri brothers, Tim Leura and Clifford Possum. Both were respected craftsmen who, according to Vivien Johnson, brought to the painting group, superb technical skills²³ which, later in the decade, would be instrumental in the movement's art world triumph.

Here the artists worked more as a cohesive unit, though still divided into their language groups, with Kaapa at his table in the middle. 'Once the work had begun, those Old Men who owned the Dreaming could advise the artist on how it should be. At each stage the men would suggest and confer.' There was usually 'an absorbed silence, broken occasionally by chanting or pleased laughter',²⁴ but the men also became more competitive and critical of each other's work – 'wild exchanges in Pintupi among the painting men was often a lambasting of one or other painter for what he had not been able to do'.²⁵ This contrasted with the tentative beginnings of the movement in the school classroom, when 'they showed no concern for the technical quality of each other's work and seldom discussed what they were individually painting'.²⁶

In the animated atmosphere of the Great Painting Room, Bardon had morphed into a fully fledged art adviser, documenting the works and their stories and ensuring their quality for sale. He had acquired a new set of mature-age students, to whom he was teaching the rudiments of that modern commodity called fine art. In reality he was also their acolyte. 'I was becoming their white man and they knew this.' The men, through their paintings, brought Bardon into their world. At the same time he was their means for learning how to communicate with the white world. And it seemed to work. They were on a roll. In March, 105 works were sold to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. In April negotiations began to incorporate the school cooperative into a company with Aboriginal directors. It was completed in November, with Tjampitjinpa as its first chairman. Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd was born.

Yet at this very moment of triumph the movement was very nearly destroyed. Following a bitter power struggle between Bardon and the welfare administrators, Bardon fled, a broken man. Four months later the Great Painting Room was closed. The men dispersed to their camps and, reported Dick Kimber, 'the whole situation was in disorder and . . . at the point of closing down'.²⁷

With a grant from the newly formed Australia Council, Bardon returned to Papunya for a short time in August 1973 to complete annotations of paintings in preparation for a book on the movement. However, the Pintupi had left, moving 26 kilometres west to Yayayi. Bardon-time was over, and in the course of the next decade the artists would move to outstations deep in the desert. Papunya, it turned out, had been a brief interlude in the desert wanderings of these painting men.

Despite its mythic proportions, the power struggle between Bardon and the welfare administrators is fully explicable in terms of history. It had been simmering throughout 1971, but came to the boil in January 1972 after Bardon approached the fledgling Australia Council for the Arts for a grant. The welfare administrators opposed his application, believing it would support a 'painting fever' that might end in loss of life and Aboriginal behaviour that 'could not be controlled'.²⁸ They were not the only ones concerned. Kimber cites 'problems that had been expressed to me by senior men from other communities' as a reason for him refusing the position of art coordinator after Bardon was forced out.²⁹

There was widespread opposition in other Western Desert communities to the Papunya painters due to a fear of exposing secret-sacred elements to the public, especially women and children. Stones had been thrown and compensation paid. Every other desert community opposed the movement and it did not spread beyond the initial Papunya group until the 1980s, when the economic potential became clear.

The Australia Council for the Arts advised Bardon that his application would be successful if the school cooperative incorporated into an independent company. From this point the welfare administrators attempted to co-opt the process, with themselves as directors. Now Bardon came up against the full force of history. The power struggle between him and the welfare administrators reflected a larger ideological battle between advocates of assimilation and self-determination. At the government level the struggle was between the Department of Interior – which administered Papunya and defended assimilation – and the Office for Aboriginal Affairs and its advisory body, the Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs. Australia's most influential public servant, Dr H. C. (Nuggett) Coombs, who chaired the Council, was slowly creating a policy climate for self-determination, a position he advanced

through the Australia Council for the Arts, which he also chaired. Bardon had become a pawn in these larger machinations.

Unable to get the agreement of Bardon or the painters for a company of their own making, the welfare administrators began a war of intimidation. Bardon felt 'a marked man'.³⁰ The final straw, as far as the painters were concerned, was the superintendent's confiscation of money earned from the sale of paintings. They were, said the superintendent, made 'by "government Aborigines" and therefore were "government paintings"'.³¹ This is when the full weight of history hit home. Unexpectedly for Bardon, the painters held him responsible, not because they were ignorant of the administration's games, but because, in their way of thinking, Bardon was 'their man' and his 'promise of good money for good work had been broken'.³² If he could not make it right, then he must take the fall.

The painters were waiting for me... and when I came in they threw their paints and brushes in the sand and began to chant: 'Money, money, money'. Then Charlie Tarawa (Tjaruru) came over to me, obviously sent by the other Pintupi, and yelled, 'What about the fucking money, boss, what about fucking money?'

It was this that finally destroyed Bardon. Unable to comprehend how he had been wedged between the histories of colonial power, modernity and indigenous resistance, Bardon could only resort to his own mythical world.

[A]s the door was just about to open onto this new world there was talk of money and nothing else, and so it seemed to me that the journey was ending just as quickly as it had begun... this money, it had become painfully apparent to me, and the obsession for it, were as much a sickness in the interior deserts as anywhere else.³³

It was finished, truly finished... I drove out of Papunya in July 1972 with a despair and a fury... for I had truly lost the game.³⁴ Once in Alice Springs, Bardon stormed into the welfare office and resigned. Something else, something dreadful, happened that day, which Bardon refused to discuss until the day he died. He never fully recovered: 'even to speak of it now would be like living the time all over again; so the story will not be told, for it cannot'.³⁵

Anyone raised in the shadow of the Bible – Bardon was a devout Christian, close to the Lutheran missionary and his family at Papunya – would recognise in Bardon's story the familiar narratives of redemption and loss, greed and power, belief and sacrifice. Bardon paints a picture of a frightening future closing in on the Aborigines as surely as a wall seemed to be coming down on their past. He sees Papunya as a desperate

post-colonial refugee camp into which once-proud bushmen have been corralled to die of broken hearts and disease under the uncaring eyes of Mammon. The Great Painting Room, like a new church, is the one ray of hope in this story of alienation, exile and damnation.

If Bardon was destroyed and the men dispersed back to their camps, in the coming years he saw that this sacrifice, like Christ's own agony, was itself part of the myth. Thus his fall fed the power of the original myth. Its necessity was confirmed by a triumphant resurrection in which, he wrote in 1989, 'an entire continent [was] wondrously re-perceived by the brutally rejected, and sick, and poor'.³⁶ What happened in the Great Painting Room was redeemed. Here was forged the aesthetic revolution which is at the heart of the movement's triumph and the myth of Papunya Tula: that 'visionary power... when everything was done wildly, lovingly, exultantly, so as to change forever that desert world, so that nothing would ever be the same again'.³⁷

The star, according to Bardon, was the deeply committed Christian Johnny Warangkula. Working 'with an intense concentration',³⁸ this 'intrepid man', who worked 'longer and harder and more often than anybody at Papunya',³⁹ accomplished two revolutionary things that greatly inspired the other painters. First, he found a compelling way to breathe 'new life' into 'an archetypal form... making his own rules stylistically and iconographically'.⁴⁰ 'Seemingly', wrote Bardon, traditional design 'was being secularised'.⁴¹ Second, Warangkula quickly developed a highly individual style in which the familiar archetypes were transformed into a dotting technique of 'baroque excitement' – an abstract layered type of mapping that, Bardon said, 'may be measured by modern aesthetics' and 'can justify the term "contemporary art"'. Bardon concluded that Warangkula was 'a genius, an innovator and maker of forms, a new man'.⁴² The new expansive pictorial space Warangkula created on his small boards was instrumental in fashioning the characteristic look of the larger Papunya Tula canvases that captivated the art world 10 years later.

Bardon's description of Warangkula's genius tells a proverbial story in the annals of modernism and modernisation: the decisive role of individual genius and style, and the secularisation of religious art. The Great Painting Room was a flashpoint of modernity, a place where an ancient aesthetic practice became modern art. Paul Carter has argued this point most effectively. Bardon, he said, introduced procedures that transformed ritual designs from collaborative performances into autonomous artworks, with appropriate finish, individualised style, narrative and pictorial clarity to be marketed as fine art paintings.⁴³ As well, said Carter, Bardon documented and provided a theoretical justification for the works. Taken together, these measures created a highly professionalised product, which, at administrative, aesthetic and theoretical levels, was

deeply informed by modernism.⁴⁴ Further, this gelled beautifully with modernism's own myths of revolution and redemption. No wonder, then, that the Western Desert art movement took the art world by storm; no wonder it is considered 'perhaps the greatest single cultural achievement of Australia's post-white settlement history',⁴⁵ and 'Australia's only artistic revolution'.⁴⁶

But how did the painters in the Great Painting Room see their art movement? If Bardon saw a desolate Fourth World camp that was not located in 'the traditional region for any of the tribal groups',⁴⁷ John Kean, an art coordinator at Papunya in the late 1970s, argues that it was an important place for the Aborigines.⁴⁸ Far from being a place of exile, Papunya was a very significant site for all the groups – 'the epicentre of the Honey Ant Dreaming complex. Here songlines converge from the south-east, east, north-east, north and west',⁴⁹ just as the Aboriginal residents had converged on the place in the mid-twentieth century, lured by the attractions of modernity – 'work, regular rations and expanded social contact'.⁵⁰ Their camps at Papunya mirrored the clusters of honey ants underground. Thus the Honey Ant Dreaming had a special resonance at this time. As the mural made clear, the convergence was not just of ancient songlines, but also with the school. It was a way of making a claim for the Honey Ant Dreaming on the school and, ipso facto, all it represented. In short, the Honey Ant Dreaming, as incarnated in the mural, was an engagement with modern times on Aboriginal terms – what Marcia Langton more generally called 'a process of incorporating the non-Aboriginal world into the Aboriginal worldview or cosmology'.⁵¹

In this respect the painters shared something with Bardon. They too had their myth; the painting movement was a new and audacious type of increase ceremony in which Dreaming asserted its power in a modern context. In this respect Dreaming is found in, rather than outside of, history. The task of its Aboriginal keepers is precisely to find and articulate it in their time, their moment, now. Is this why the Old Men, the ceremonial leaders, supported the painters from the beginning and in the face of considerable Aboriginal opposition?

The painters were also up to something else, albeit related, that was equally audacious, namely, the political assertion of self-determination in the context of the welfare regime. Bardon describes two of its leaders, Tjampitjinpa and Warangkula, as charming 'rogues', men on the make. Indeed, the audacity of turning deeply held religious practices into an anti-colonial ideology of self-determination as well as profit requires a roguish mind, and one that presumes no necessary contradiction between Western Desert traditions and modernity. This surely is a primary lesson

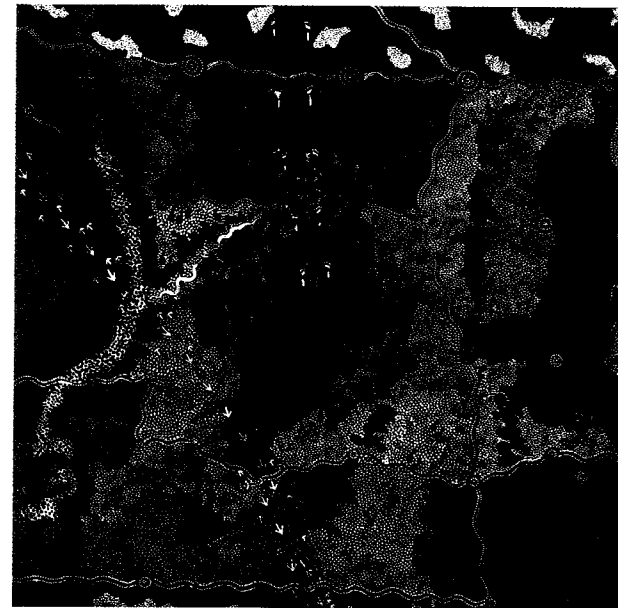


Figure 14.3 Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Anmatyerre/Arrernte peoples, *Warlugulong* 1976. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1981. Photograph: Christopher Snee. © Estate of the artist 2011. Licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency.



Figure 14.4 Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Anmatyerre/Arrernte peoples, *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* 1980. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1988. © Estate of the artist 2011. Licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency.

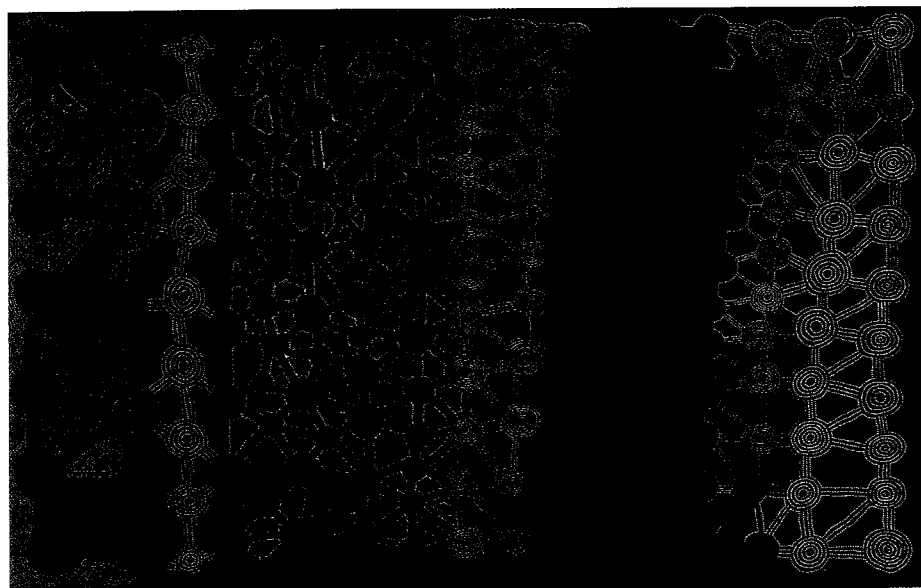


Figure 14.5 Charlie Tjapangati, *Tingarri Dreaming* 1981. National Museum of Australia, Canberra. © Estate of the artist 2011. Licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency. Photograph: Dean McNicoll.

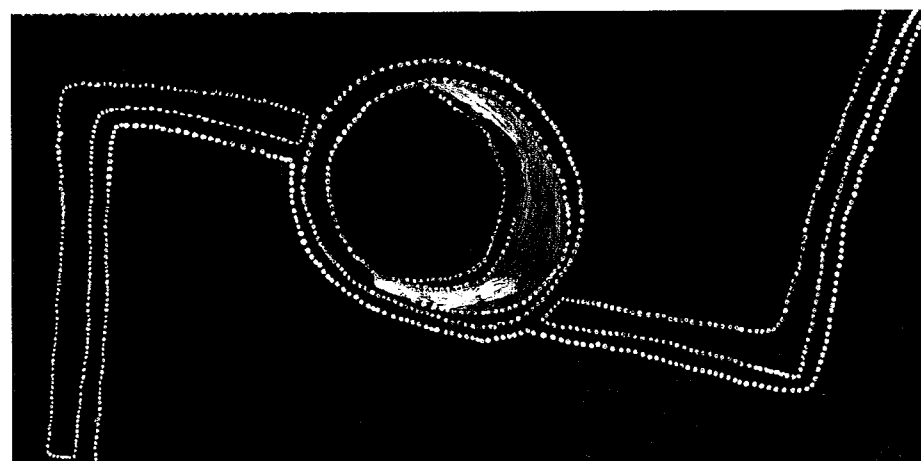


Figure 14.6 Rover Thomas, Kukatja/Wangkajunga peoples, *The Shade from the Hill Comes Over and Talks in Language* 1984. Holmes à Court Gallery, Perth.

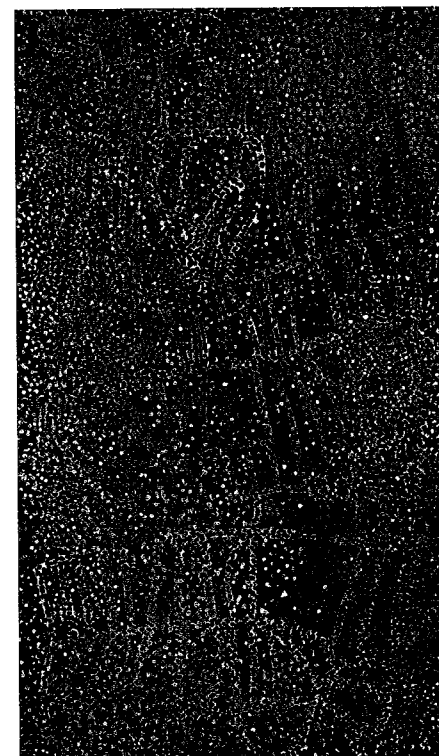


Figure 14.7 Emily Kam Kngwarray, Anmatyerre people, *After Rain* 1990. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1990. © Emily Kam Kngwarray/Licensed by VISCOPY Australia.



Figure 15.1 Douglas Kilburn, *No title (Two Koorie Women)* c. 1847. © National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased 2004.

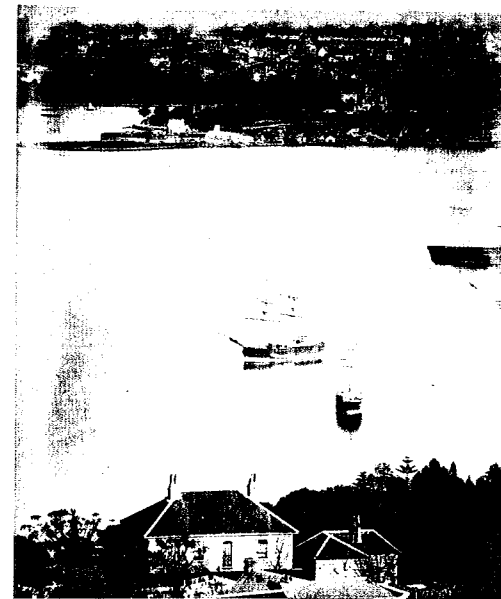
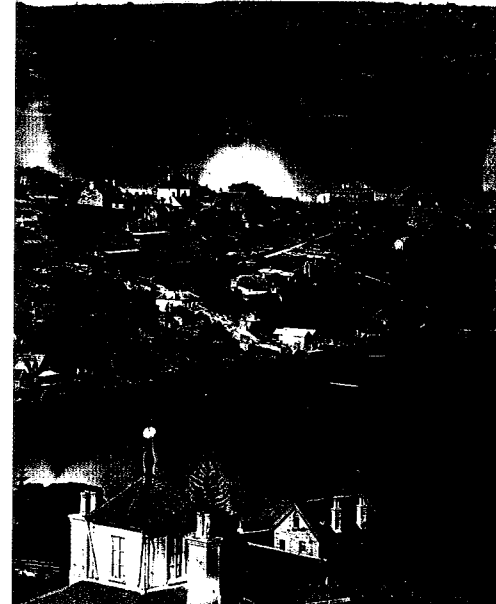
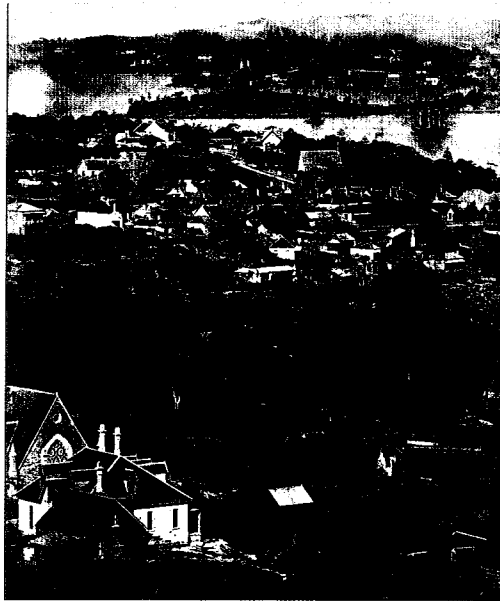


Figure 15.2 Charles Bayliss, *Panorama of Sydney Harbour and Suburbs from the North Shore* and *Panorama of Middle Head Defences* 1875 (details). © National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1982.



Figure 15.3 Harold Cazneaux, *The Spirit of Endurance* 1937. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. South Australian Government Grant 1978.



Figure 15.4 Max Dupain, *Sunbaker* 1937, printed 1970s. © Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1976.



Figure 15.5 David Moore, *Migrants Arriving in Sydney* 1966 (printed later). Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. © Estate of David Moore. Gift of the artist 1997. Photograph: Diana Panuccio.



Figure 15.6 Carol Jerrems, *Vale Street* 1975. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gift of the Philip Morris Arts Grant 1982. © Ken Jerrems and the Estate of Lance Jerrems.



Figure 15.7 Anne Zahalka, *The Bathers* 1989, printed 1990. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Hallmark Cards Australian Photography Collection Fund, 1990. © Anne Zahalka, 1989/Licensed by VISCOPY Australia.

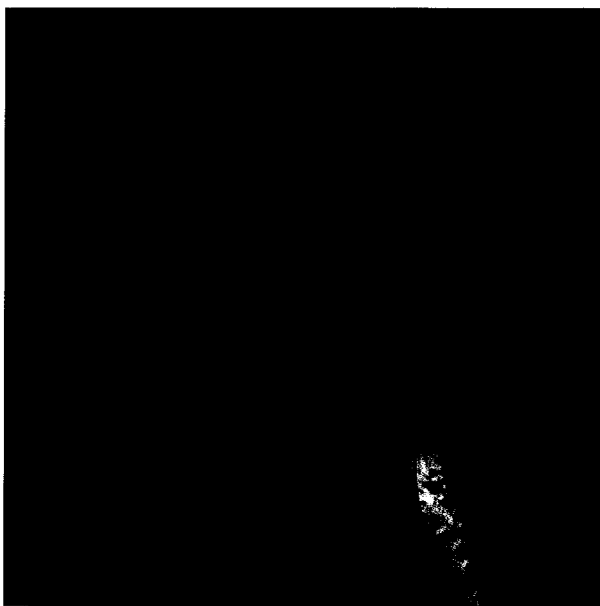


Figure 15.8 Bill Henson, *Untitled* 1990–91, From the *Paris Opera* project series 1990–91. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased through the Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of David Syme and Co. Ltd, Fellow, 1991.

to be learnt from the Aborigines' enthusiasm for painting: it empowered them as modern individuals while simultaneously empowering their traditions and religion.

By contrast, Bardon's narrative reiterates a universal story of loss and redemption that speaks mainly to the Christian conscience. As the motto of his last book says: 'Give to the innocent that which is their due'. However, the painters were intent on *taking* their due. Far from being innocents they were very much knowing and willing participants in the modern world. Since first contact – which in this area had been 100 years earlier – Aborigines had developed cross-cultural art forms designed for the post-contact situation. The nearby Hermannsburg Mission was one important focus for such activity. Here Albert Namatjira had pioneered the occupation of professional artist as a means by which Aborigines could make money and more generally negotiate, in a creative and cultural fashion, a place for themselves as individuals in the modern world.

According to Fred Myers, who lived with the Pintupi between 1973 and 1975, in these early years the Papunya painters understood the paintings 'as being "given to Canberra", to an entity understood somewhat undifferentiatedly as "the government"'. This giving was 'at once a declaration of one's own value and an engagement with the recipient' – which in this case was the Australian government.⁵² Instead of Bardon's myth of redemption and revolution, Myers concludes, altogether more prosaically: the 'acrylic painting should be reckoned on a continuum of Aboriginal productions of culture that we would ultimately understand as forms of activism within a multicultural context'.⁵³

If we follow Myers, the art movement was of its time. As the government attempted to progress the postwar policy of assimilation in Papunya during the 1960s, Aboriginal activism and self-assertion across Australia were giving shape to the ideology of self-determination. Papunya was one flashpoint in these developments. It was rocked by more than one riot, and for this reason was the first remote Aboriginal community to get a police station. It opened the year Bardon arrived. In June, as the school murals were being painted, the Aboriginal flag, designed by the Luritja man Harold Thomas, was raised for the first time in Adelaide. In February 1972, as the painters were moving into the Great Painting Room, the flag received wide publicity when it flew above the Tent Embassy, hastily erected by Aboriginal activists on the lawns opposite Parliament House in Canberra. They were, among other things, voicing their solidarity with the ongoing Gurindji pastoral strike and land claim, begun in 1966 to the north of Papunya. In late July, as Bardon suffered his personal torment, the Tent Embassy was ripped down and raised again in violent clashes with police.

By this time the policy of assimilation had been discredited. Bardon arrived at Papunya on the cusp of a new era. With the election of the Whitlam Labor government in December 1972, self-determination became government policy, creating a new climate of cultural freedom for Indigenous people across Australia. Its importance to the fledgling art movement cannot be overestimated. It initiated a period of intense ceremonial revival that underwrote the increased art production across remote Australia.

Indigenous Australians also reclaimed their nomadic traditions, but this time with modern vehicles. Papunya Tula was just one development at the time in their search for modern forms of traditional expression.⁵⁴ Equally important for the company was the Labor government's founding of the Aboriginal Arts Board early in 1973. Its members consisted entirely of Aboriginal Australians, including one of Papunya Tula's painters and Bardon's confidant, Tim Leura. The Arts Board came to the rescue of Papunya Tula after Bardon's expulsion.

Throughout the 1970s the Papunya Tula movement remained highly localised, and there was little market or critical interest in the movement. The artists were mainly sustained by the Aboriginal Arts Board, the principal patron of artworks and organiser of exhibitions. Most importantly, its commissioning of large 2- and 3-metre paintings gave full rein to the new pictorial space first glimpsed in Warangkula's boards. The first such large painting (now lost) was completed collaboratively by Clifford Possum, Tim Leura and Billy Stockman in 1974. This new scale suited the mappings of (sometimes multiple) Dreaming stories developed by Possum and Leura, and it was their paintings and others like them that first sparked art world interest.⁵⁵

Three such paintings were exhibited in the inaugural 1981 *Australian Perspecta* – the premier venue of Australian contemporary art in the 1980s. They were Clifford Possum's (assisted by Tim Leura) *Warlugulong* (1976) (Figure 14.3), Tim Leura's (assisted by Clifford Possum) *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* (1980) (Figure 14.4), and Charlie Tjapangati's *Tingarri Dreaming* (1981) (Figure 14.5).

Within a few years Papunya Tula was being celebrated as the instigator of a new art movement in Australian art. This acclaim and the market it created provided the impetus for the rapid expansion of the art movement across the desert. Former Aboriginal opposition to it evaporated. As if spreading out along the Honey Ant songlines, it was taken up in Balgo and Warmun to the north-west, Yuendumu and Lajamanu to the north, Utopia to the north-east and Ernabella to the south.

Papunya Tula Artists remained the most successful art centre throughout the 1980s, but it no longer set the agenda. Its brand was usurped by a new creativity exploding across the desert, and its impetus was now

driven by an expanding market for Aboriginal art that was shaped by a new set of art world paradigms. In particular, the art world began to celebrate the *genius* of individual artists, thus infusing the myth of Papunya Tula with that of modernism.

Papunya Tula artists Clifford Possum and Michael Nelson Tjakamarra were early examples, but the first superstar was Rover Thomas, who produced works such as *The Shade From the Hill Comes Over and Talks in Language* (1984) (Figure 14.6). Like the Pintupi, he hailed from the Gibson Desert. In 1975, aged about 50, he settled in the small east Kimberley town of Turkey Creek (now Warmun), after nearly 40 years living as a stockman. He began painting about six years later, quickly developing a fluent and unique style. The genius of his paintings was obvious, even in these early years. Mediating their rich tonalities, expansive space and washed ochre surfaces is an indeterminate structure that creates a compelling poetic and metaphysical effect.

When Thomas began painting there was no art centre or art movement at Warmun, and the painterly yet minimal colour-field style of Kimberley art was little known. When he had arrived at Turkey Creek in 1975 it was a government reserve with few facilities – a sort of refugee camp – to which a small number of Aborigines were gravitating following the restructure of the cattle industry that denied them work. The only traditional painter there was Paddy Jaminji, Thomas's uncle. He painted boards for the *Kurirr Kurirr* dance cycle which had been given to Thomas in a dream in 1975, and which was widely performed over the next decade. Rover began painting in 1981 following interest in these boards by the art dealer Mary Mächa. Thus he seemed to come from nowhere, making the genius and maturity of his paintings even more mysterious.

In 1990 Thomas's paintings were exhibited, along with those of urban Aboriginal artist Trevor Nickolls, in the Australian pavilion at the Venice Biennale – the first time Australia had been represented at the Biennale by Aboriginal artists. By this time the Western Desert art movement had gained international attention as a vivid example of the emerging post-colonial turn away from the art world's Eurocentrism towards a new globalism. Suddenly Aboriginal art was part of a wider revolution, this time a global revolt against the hegemony of Western art. While Aboriginal art thus became even more embedded in contemporary art and thereby history, this turn of events, along with the sudden globalisation of the highly localised art of desert communities, was as inexplicable as it was unexpected. If these art world developments gave Aboriginal artists a new platform in Australia and overseas, they also further entrenched the myth.

As if to confirm this, an immediate star emerged in the early 1990s from Utopia: Emily Kam Kngwararray, an 80-year-old Aboriginal woman

who spoke virtually no English and, like Thomas, had once worked in the cattle industry. Her Dreaming designs, such as *After Rain* (1990) (Figure 14.7), painted with a Herculean energy that belied her age, had a captivatingly sensuous presence. Also, as with Thomas's paintings, her imagery seemed completely devoid of the Aboriginal iconography associated with earlier Papunya Tula art and more like the classic abstraction of late New York modernism. Yet she was seemingly ignorant of and indifferent to modernists, inspiring one critic to call her the 'impossible modernist'.⁵⁶ Such was the enigma of her art that it is rightly considered the apotheosis of the myth of Western Desert painting.

No matter how much the Western Desert art movement is a historical formation, its mythic presence, first articulated by Bardon, looms larger than ever over its reception at popular and critical levels. However, the achievement of the painters was not so much given by time as won from history. They played an exemplary and pivotal role in the historical struggle for self-determination and cultural independence. In this respect, Bardon's intuition as he tried to grasp what was happening in the Great Painting Room was correct. Here was something exceptional, great and unexpected, something that demanded its own myth. It will be some time, I suspect, before the full history of the movement becomes visible, but even then the myth will prevail. Modern historians might make their names as the spoilers of myths, but who in the art world would want to de-mythologise Papunya Tula?

15 Photography and Australia

Isobel Crombie

On 13 May 1841 the visiting French seaman, Captain Lucas, stood near a fountain in Macquarie Place in the colony of New South Wales. Around him were a small number of invited guests, a reporter from the *Australasian Chronicle* and some curious passers-by. For several minutes (perhaps as many as nine) the group waited as Lucas exposed his daguerreotype plate, and the result was the first recorded photograph taken in Australia.

It would be good to imagine that a sense of ceremony guided this historic event, but it appears its intent was pragmatic and was meant to help Lucas sell his 'very singular invention' at 'prime cost'.¹ Despite its undoubted novelty and the subsequent description of the image as 'astonishingly minute and beautiful', Lucas was not successful in his aim and the resulting daguerreotype was subsequently lost. The earliest extant Australian photograph is George Baron Goodman's daguerreotype of Dr William Bland, which was taken between November 1844 and early January 1845.

Contemporary descriptions note that the subject of this now tantalisingly obscure first photograph was a view of the streetscape and buildings in Bridge Street, Sydney. The decision to focus on the physical expressions of colonial endeavour was no doubt practical – the length of time required for outdoor exposures generally turned people into a blur – but it was also an appropriate beginning to the history of photography in a country profoundly influenced by European colonisation and its legacies.

Over 200 years and many millions of images later, it is hard to contain the energetic and complex nature of Australian art photography into one neat story. It is certainly possible to consider local photography in relationship to worldwide aesthetic and technological trends. Linked to this 'meta-narrative', Australian practitioners can appear to be somewhat minor players on the world stage, having neither pioneered major technological inventions nor led any aesthetic movements. A more productive and enlivened approach is instead to consider Australian photography as part of the specific culture and time in which the works were created. Using this localised framework it becomes clear that throughout